# How relevant is UK political science? A riposte to Matthew Flinders and Peter Riddell

Apr 17 2012

*Criticisms of academics, particularly of political scientists, have dominated recent academic and media debates amid claims that the professionalization of the discipline has led to the subject becoming detached from public life. However,* **Peter John** *challenges the notion of a long-lost golden era and argues that in fact engagement is improving and has benefited from new digital tools.*

At its 62nd annual conference, held in Belfast on 3-5 April 2012, the UK Political Studies Association (PSA) sponsored a plenary session called 'Defending Politics, Politicians and Political Science', at which I was expecting panelists to celebrate both the practice and study of politics. To be fair, David Blunkett MP gave politics a robust defence drawing on his long experience, which also contained some criticisms of contemporary politicians and political parties. But the other two speakers used the occasion to attack the study of politics in United Kingdom. Both Matthew Flinders and Peter Riddell argued that professionalisation had detached the subject from public life, encouraging political scientists to be more interested in talking to each rather than those from the outside world.

Anyone who teaches and researches politics should take such a criticism seriously. It is a powerful argument that has gained wide currency in recent years. It has now been made by important and well-respected people: Flinders has attracted considerable attention from his programme for BBC Radio 4, *In Defence of Politics*, and from his book of the same name; Riddell is director of the prestigious Institute for Government and is a member of the Higher Education Funding Council for England's (Hefce) Research Excellence Framework (REF) Politics and International Studies sub-panel, which will judge the impact of UK political science.

The problem is that this attack on the study of politics has been presented with no empirical support other than anecdotes. Although it is plausible to argue that professionalisation could drive out more policy-relevant and public work, such a claim needs backing up. And even if the critique were true, it is probably now dated and does not represent much of the activity happening in political science today. In fact, with the greater opportunity for real-time exchange on the internet, political scientists as conveyers of knowledge have a unique part to play. Such a role does not depend on 'grand old man' public figures, which Flinders invoked by his reference to Bernard Crick, but involves a more open relationship between academia and the public realm, which includes people wide a range of expertise and backgrounds working in UK universities. Moreover, the current wave of blogging and twittering may produce a more dynamic and timely impact than occurs in the broadcast media, conveying recent evidence and research directly into the public realm, which in turn is picked up in the older forms of media and by policy-makers.

Though sharing a common perspective, Flinders and Riddell say different things. Flinders is more concerned with the practices of those who work in higher education today. In his view, the incentive structure within universities ensures academics only strive to secure publications in prestigious outlets, such as papers in high-ranking journals and books with university publishers, which are likely to carry favour in the REF. Everyone who seeks employment in higher education from postgraduate study onwards must have a portfolio of these publications. Publication record determines who gets appointed and promoted. There is no reward for the public-regarding academic who wants to engage in a wider debate; rather the incentive is not to do this kind of work at all and to concentrate on producing 'gold standard' publications that nobody else other than a few experts read. The result

is that research in politics is not designed to impact on the public agenda; nor do political scientists make much effort to advance their work even if it could. As evidence for these propositions, Flinders cites the respondents to his interviews with politicians and civil servants who cannot remember a book or article in current political science that has influenced them. Flinders recommends that political scientists adopt a multi-pronged approach to their work that delivers the top-level publications but also creates outputs for public consumption.

Riddell shares many of these views, but focuses more on the language used in political science publications, which he thinks are badly-written and too heavily laden with jargon. With the obscure style of writing, Riddell is not surprised that UK politicians and civil servants do not take much notice of political science.

By drawing attention to the incentive structures with higher education and the readability of political science outputs, Flinders and Riddell make plausible arguments that could be tested (using the techniques of modern political science perhaps?). The problem is that they do not present any firm evidence themselves, relying on anecdote and appeals to the apparently obvious. However, it is equally plausible that there is no detachment between the study of politics and its practice, and that the relationship between the academic and the public realms has grown stronger not weaker in recent years.

The first point is that there may never have been a golden age of British academia before the predecessor for the REF, the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), apparently drove out public-orientated research. It is certainly an implication of Flinders' argument that the period before should have been more relevant, but it may have been the case that the study of politics only generated a few public figures but most work in politics was not noticed.

The second point is that the reasons for the reluctance for practitioners not to use work in political science – if in fact they are reluctant to do so – may owe more to the culture of British public life itself than what academics do or do not do. Britain's elite has always been hostile to intellectuals, a tradition going back to the eighteenth century, and contrasts with other countries, such as France for example, where the recent death of the director of leading political science body, *Sciences Po*, was headline news. The point is that irrelevance may occur whether the output of political science is guided by the REF or not.

In fact, the record of UK political science has been very good, with long-term impacts in for example the study of elections, the reform of electoral systems, party funding, decentralisation, devolution, constitutional reform, public management reform, the work of the House of Commons and Lords, and in the conduct of foreign policy. Many political scientists have become practising politicians, such as Andrew Adonis, Philip Norton, William Wallace and Tony Wright.

The third point is that the critique – if it were ever true – is dated, reflecting the short-term culture of the 1990s and early 2000s rather than now. Higher education is still very focused on the REF but it also expects academics to carry out effectively their other roles, such as being excellent in teaching. Though appointment committees mainly look at the publication record of the well-trained candidates that appear in front of them, they also value other characteristics, which include the ability to engage and to teach. Universities are much more aware of where most of their income originates and how their reputation will be sustained by public intellectuals. External bodies have been influential too, such as the research councils. Since the 1980s the Economic and Social Research Council has required applicants and grant holders to show how they deliver practitioner-relevant outputs, and other funding bodies such as the Nuffield Foundation, The Leverhulme Trust and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation have always had similar conditions, which include producing short bullet-point findings for public consumption. Hefce itself has been important. It has rewarded public contributions in previous research exercises, such as through measures of esteem, and impact is now much more prominent in REF2014 through the aim of 'enhancing contribution higher education (HE) makes to the economy and society'. Finally, the PSA has played a role, such as through its well-reported Annual Awards Ceremony, which directly involves many practising politicians, as well as its successful press briefings (held in the Institute for Government). All these factors have altered

the incentive structure.

The main change in recent years, however, has come from academics themselves. There is a revolution in information afoot, where anyone can produce output that can feed easily into public debate. This comes from the development of the internet, in particular from new social media, such as Twitter. Posts on Twitter do not just deliver short comments, but also give links to longer pieces, such as research (often done with state of the art methods that political scientists are now well trained in), so are a way in which academics can plug research findings straight in the public debate and policy in a way that is immediate and timely, and does not rely on others reading a book, locating a static website and attending a press launch. It is an environment in which academics can flourish because it is quite similar to the way in which they work anyway. Even the most REF-focused academic knows the importance of dissemination and citation as well as getting published. So it is no surprise to observe the explosion of content on the internet, such as blogs and tweets from the Universities of Nottingham, Surrey and Manchester, and the LSE Impact of Social Sciences Project, to name few centres that have emerged in recent years, as well as many lone bloggers and tweeters taking the initiative. It is possible that the outward-facing activities of academics have increased in recent years across all media outlets and in advice to government. Of course, such a claim is conjecture, but it is no different from the one officially sponsored by the PSA (with no one on the panel to present an opposing point of view). In short, it needs testing.

The fourth point concerns the clarity of political science publications. Here again is an evidence-free zone. The counterclaim is that the output of political science is actually very clear and pays good attention to the standard of English. Editors of academic journals and the tireless (and rarely publicly recognised) editorial assistants pay lot of attention to this issue. Every person who submits an article to a good journal knows that one certain route to rejection is poor expression. It sends a signal to the reviewer that the work is poor and has not been produced with a sufficient amount of care. In fact, political scientists are good communicators and writers for a simple reason: they have to present their ideas to a very critical audience that now has the power to bite back – students. Every lecturer knows that the current cohort of students will not put up with too much theory and terms that are poorly explained.

Technical terms do appear in journals because they explain what common language would itself obscure, such as the language of methodology and statistics. Without some training these terms are hard (but not impossible) to understand. But technical material appears in journals from other disciplines, such as in science or psychology, yet no one complains. Today's great communicators are the scientists or psychologists who appear with such authority on the TV and the radio; but most journalists (even the science specialists) and civil servants probably do not understand the content of the scientific papers that generate the publicity. In fact, UK political science also has many excellent communicators. BBC Radio 4 Today regularly invites academics for interview, and often they are political scientists (today, the 16th April, in the background whilst writing this piece, I can hear the voice of Stuart Wilks-Heeg talking with Peter Riddell about party funding).

So, in defence of politics, I contend that the attack on politics presented by Flinders and Riddell has no foundation, and there is an equally plausible argument that engagement by political scientists has always been strong and has increased in recent years. Of course, some smart methods, which might need the odd technical term to explain them, would find out whether Flinders/Riddell or John is right.

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